

The Life Skills ^{and} Employment Collaborative: Partnering with Community Resources

Undoubtedly, you already know that one good way to reduce recidivism is to start connecting inmates to appropriate community services as they leave custody, so that their most pressing needs are met when they hit the street. However, if your jail or correctional center supervises minimum security offenders and is not willing to give up some control of reentry programs by placing them in the hands of local social service providers, you may not be offering the most effective reentry programs possible.

Giving up some control over inmates is a frightening concept for most jails—and for good reason. At the same time, however, some correctional systems concerned with reentry are looking for new ways to connect inmates to services outside the institution. In many jurisdictions, the key may be working with agencies that have been successfully serving this population for years.

In Massachusetts, county facilities house inmates serving up to 2½-year sentences. Increasing numbers of inmates have been getting paroled over the past year, making for a rapid turnover. Through a system based on mutual respect, faith, and constant communication, we have learned that educational programs operated by outside agencies can become a valuable resource for a local correctional institution and for its community. It often takes time to create the appropriate linkages, but it can be well worth the effort.

Building on Partners' Strengths

The Hampden County Sheriff's Department (HCSD) oversees a life skills program in western Massachusetts operated by the Corporation for Public Management (CPM), a large, community-based, non-profit human services provider. An opportunity came along 4½ years ago to work together on a reentry project through a grant provided by the U.S. Department of Education, through its Office of Correctional Education. A joint HCSD-CPM task force was formed, led by Tom

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Flood, Executive Vice President of CPM, to determine the roles and responsibilities of each entity while capitalizing on the unique strengths of each. The Sheriff's Department found CPM's experience in the field to be very helpful. CPM had a long history of running successful job readiness and job placement programs for special needs populations and of working with the criminal justice population. HCSD also had a long history of reentry work. Combining the groups was a natural fit.

The Sheriff's Department works with the Life Skills and Employment Collaborative (LSEC) operated by CPM in Springfield, Massachusetts. It is the only life skills demonstration program funded by the Office of Correctional Education that operates in a community setting. Like most jail-based programs, the LSEC has as one of its goals to address criminogenic risk factors in offenders. Life skills and employment training programs are the primary vehicles for reaching this goal. LSEC is designed to provide both pre- and post-release inmates with the cognitive and economic resources needed to avoid continued criminal activity.

Behind the walls, the Sheriff's Department operates a number of successful job placement programs for inmates who may have a work history, an education, and possibly some real vocational skills. However, outside the institution, the LSEC fills a crucial gap by reaching less-educated and less-motivated offenders while building on programming the inmates have already received inside the jail. A demographic breakdown of program participants shows that roughly 60% are of Hispanic origin, 25% are African-American, and 15% are Caucasian.

Employment Training and Follow-Up

The LSEC program receives inmate referrals from HCSD programs. Participants attend the program in a community setting 5 days a week, for 6 hours each day—similar to the hours in a regular work week. Participants receive 147 hours of customized life skills and job readiness training in 4-week cycles.

The LSEC provides:

- Life skills training;
- Employment counseling;
- Case management;
- Job readiness training;
- Job development/placement; and
- Post-placement follow-up and support services.

The job readiness training component consists of extensive assistance on job readiness skills, soft skills, and budgeting and finances. The life skills component consists of an intense cognitive restructuring curriculum designed to change inmates' thinking, behavior, and attitudes.

After completing the program, participants are placed in full-time employment, with 90 days of intense follow-up and support. Follow-up also occurs at 6-month

and 1-year intervals. These post-placement services include on-site visits with workers and their employers, which are intended to prevent or resolve any job-related problems. Visits or phone calls confirm that the person is still on the job and lend support to either the job holder or the supervisor in dealing with work-related or non-work-related problems that affect job performance.

Selected participants also receive additional preparation services through involvement in a Community Service/Work Experience component. This is an 8-week basic construction training program for LSEC graduates.

In year four of the program, the average wage earned by participants was \$8.27/hour, as compared with the minimum wage of \$6.75/hour. Fully 88% of the positions included benefits. Equally as important were retention rates:

- 85% remained working for 30 days;
- 65% remained working for 60 days; and
- 45% remained working for 90 days.

Again, the strong partnership between the HCSD and the LSEC Program has been a crucial element in the success of the program and in helping the HCSD carry out its mission. Sheriff Michael J. Ashe, Jr., of the HCSD comments, "We all know that an individual in a community with a criminal pattern of behavior can cost his fellow citizens a tremendous amount of money, so the community agencies and groups outside the fences certainly have a stake in successful community reentry. They can serve the community by becoming full partners with criminal justice agencies in seeking to assure successful reentry."

Working Together

As in any relationship, being aware and respectful of each other's goals, differences, and similarities is vital. Confidence in each other's professionalism and satisfaction with the accomplishments of the co-partners are also key ingredients in the program's success. All programs, inside and outside the jail, must find a common ground from which to operate. For both CPM and HCSD the bottom line is the improvement of public safety.

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CPM believes, and the HCSD agrees, that inmates often need the opportunity to "test things out" in the community. In many cases, reentry should be a slow process. Attending a program in the community while still under custody or just recently released offers an offender a gradual approach. This slow reentry system also fills an important gap for the institution. For example, sometimes when an inmate gets a job while under correctional supervision, the job is attached to the jail and not related to the inmate's own personal reentry goals. As a result, he or she often leaves that job after being released from supervision.

Because CPM is out in the community with the offenders, it is better situated than correctional staff to keep the person connected, working, sober, and crime-free. Overall, the LSEC enhances what the jail is trying to do for its inmates.

The environments of the two partners are, of course, quite different: one is inside and secure, the other is outside and open. Hence, both partners needed to adjust their attitudes to overcome their differences and reach for similarities. The jail collaborates by relegating some of its security responsibility to the program to accomplish shared goals, and the program collaborates by supporting the jail in its efforts to deal with inmate security. When there is any disagreement, all parties sit down to discuss the issue. The goal is always to reach a common ground so that both partners can operate cooperatively and look out for the other's best interest. For example, the HCSD modified a 'no-hat' policy because the practice did not affect the overall goal of public safety.

The security of participating minimum status inmates is entrusted to this community program every day; this could not be accomplished without mutual trust. Each partner is well aware of:

- The rules;
- What each other needs;
- The negative impact of failure and miscommunication; and
- That we need each other to succeed.

In many institutions there is a well-defined line between security and treatment. That same line is often drawn between what goes on inside the jail and what occurs in the outside world. Both HCSD and CPM believe that treatment can be carried out in the community while still maintaining security. Allowing social service agencies to operate the program enables the jails and correctional centers to focus primarily on security.

Correctional institutions and social service groups share the same mission of enhancing public safety; they just have different ways of reaching that goal. This strong and effective partnership is an example of what can be accomplished when a jail and a community agency focus on their similarities and work together to provide the best services possible for offenders reentering the community. ■

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